

Global Information Society Watch 2009

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*Dedicated to A.K. Mahan - an activist who valued
intellectual rigour and concrete outcomes.*

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CAMEROON

PROTEGE QV

Sylvie Siyam, Serge Daho and Emilie Jabouin
www.protegeqv.org



Introduction

Cameroon is a country located in central Africa with a population of about 18 million inhabitants and a low average population density. It has a low-middle income level with a gross national product of USD 2,300 per capita, and is ranked in 144th position out of 177 countries classified in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Index.

Cameroon's constitution (in the preamble) lists several inalienable rights and provisions guaranteeing the freedom of speech and opinion.

The digitisation of Cameroonian society is still in its infancy, and telecommunication infrastructure is significantly underdeveloped. The Scan-ICT 2006 report reveals that the cost of a computer is equivalent to the annual per capita income, which makes this tool inaccessible to the majority of Cameroonians and constitutes a major obstacle to internet access for the population (less than 1% of households have an internet connection). Moreover, according to the Scan-ICT survey, 66.2% of institutions have no computers and only 6.2% have more than one computer. Yet the country is endowed with a fibre-optic backbone running along the Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline. It is also a landing point for the SAT-3 submarine cable, in Douala, with a capacity of 2.5 gigabits (Gb).¹

Policy environment

Since the 1990s, legislation in Cameroon has catered for freedom of speech to ensure a free press. In practice, however, there are still considerable limitations, such as governmental sanctions ranging from fines to censorship and even imprisonment. The professionalisation of journalism is not supported in that there is a perception that the state should be shielded from the media. Trumped-up allegations against the independent press and attempts to control the information sector generally are still common today. Governmental structures still play an important role in countering the implementation and reinforcement of the law when the state's status quo is threatened.² The incarceration in 1998 of Pius Njawé, a Cameroonian journalist, is proof of tensions found in Cameroonian society in respect to freedom of speech.³ Cameroon has been one of the countries most reluctant to democratise at the state level: it allows plurality yet makes

sure that important barriers that stunt the growth, credibility and integrity of the media are put in place.⁴

In Cameroon, internet access and use have increased considerably. This has partly been due to state initiatives that have also focused on building information technology knowledge and professionalism, and pushing for technological upgrades.⁵ Since 2002, online access has been used primarily for administrative purposes. Inside government structures, information and communications technologies (ICTs) have been used to improve governance, especially when it comes to corruption. The SIGIPES programme is a good example of this. It keeps track of civil servants' professional career records, to prevent fraud and practices like claiming double or triple salaries.⁶ Other technological reforms have involved SYDONIA, which is a trans-border customs clearance programme enabling the tracking of merchandise.

Advancements are also noticeable when it comes to the digitisation of the press. The main Cameroonian newspapers are now available online, which shows a certain familiarisation of the internet among Cameroonian intellectuals and the middle class. A number of websites now also offer a wide range of information on government activities, including those of the Presidency, as well as companies and non-governmental organisations.

Nevertheless, infrastructure to support online communication is not assured due to lack of funding and maintenance, which also raises connectivity costs. In terms of sharing information over the internet, no significant limitations, such as censorship, have been found. State intrusion into the online sphere is nonetheless suspected, according to the Institut Panos Paris.⁷

Legislative environment⁸

The following key laws are relevant to accessing online information in Cameroon:

- Telecommunications Law No. 98/014 of 14 July 1998, which regulates telecommunications, but does not deal with internet access.

1 Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (2006) *Final Report: National Survey on the Level of Penetration and Usage of ICT in Cameroon (Scan-ICT)*.

2 IREX (2007) Media Sustainability Index Africa: Cameroon. www.irex.org/programs/MSI_Africa/cameroon.asp#intro

3 Institut Panos Paris (1999) *Internet à l'usage des journalistes africains*, Karthala.

4 IREX (2007) *op. cit.*

5 National Agency for Information and Communication Technologies (ANTIC) (2007) Chapitre 3: Axes d'intervention prioritaires, in *Stratégie Nationale de Développement des Technologies de l'information et de la communication*.

6 Ministry of Public Service and Administrative Reform (MINFOPRA) (2002) *SIGIPES & Aquarium: More Transparent Handling of Personnel Files in Cameroon*. www.egov4dev.org/transparency/case/sigipes.shtml

7 Institut Panos Paris (1999) *op. cit.*

8 Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (2006) *op. cit.*

- Law No. 0053 of 19 December 1990, dealing with mass communication, supplemented by 1996 legislation dealing with censorship and the freedom of the press. A Decree of 3 April 2000 applies this legislation.

Building a knowledge society slowly

The development of ICTs is considered advantageous and even crucial to development. The government foresees the positive use of ICTs in health, agriculture and rural development, education and training, and research, as well as in alleviating poverty generally.⁹ Even in the most remote areas, the *Institut Panos Paris* states that internet access can be very useful in public programmes – for example, checking medication stocks in remote locations, or obtaining vital and basic health information. This saves time and lives where medical assistance and/or knowledge are needed and hard to access.¹⁰

In 2001, a head of state announcement stated that ICTs would be introduced at all levels of schooling.¹¹ Following the announcement, the Ministry of National Education published a decree that computer literacy and essential ICT knowledge should become a compulsory school subject beginning September 2003. As a result, more and more schools in Cameroon are being equipped with computers, although there are no precise figures available.

Civil society is playing an active role in bringing ICTs to the classroom. For example, in February 2009, PROTEGE QV provided the Biyem-Assi Bilingual Primary School with five second-hand computers. Another civil society organisation, SchoolNet Cameroon, equipped 34 schools with 380 used and refurbished computers shipped by World Computer Exchange, an organisation based in the United States (US), in May 2001.¹² Through yearly festivities such as *La Fête de l'Internet* (Internet Festival), RESCATIC,¹³ CONESTEL,¹⁴ Wagne.net (an African telecommunications service provider), ANAIS-AC,¹⁵ and many others have contributed to ICT awareness raising through conferences, debates, presentations and training sessions.¹⁶

However, a number of challenges remain. There are, for example, few online resources available for the classroom. School enrolment figures are also low, with secondary school enrolment rates of 51% for boys and 36% for girls.¹⁷ These low rates stand as an important barrier to the spread of ICT use in Cameroon.

Serious obstacles to social and economic development using ICTs are also encountered in the academic field. A survey revealed that internet access was ranked one of the highest priority needs by both students and lecturers in Cameroonian universities.¹⁸ University students, faculties and libraries have very limited access to the internet. When the internet is available, connectivity poses a problem for staff and students, who frequently have to access the internet off campus.

This limited access to online information, academic journals and other networks is a setback for the development of scholars. Professionalism, innovation and social, economic and intellectual development suffer from this, as well as the credibility of Cameroonian universities.¹⁹ The irony is that the youth should be the focus of government programs, as they are the future pillars of ICT development as well as economic and social development in the country.²⁰

The World Bank and others have sustained the idea that developing ICTs is key for social and economic development. ICTs are said to bring about “efficiency, transparency and participation.”²¹ This is said to result in a better quality of life where human rights would be respected (even minimally), where information would circulate, and where society would evolve positively through the sharing of ideas and knowledge. However, the essential precondition of this is political will – a possible challenge in Cameroon. The government is adopting programmes and policies to encourage the adoption of ICTs in the country, and to aspire to universal online access for Cameroonians through different telecommunication development strategies.²² But progress is timid.

Funding and infrastructure development are insufficient at the local level.²³ Legal frameworks and financial shortages also limit professionalism in journalism, a sector crucial to raising awareness and bringing about change (and development).²⁴

New trends

New initiatives in Cameroon are focusing on spurring online access. In urban areas, rates of internet use are increasing in cybercafés. This is explained by some as being due to the rising rate of young Cameroonian women and men using the internet in hopes of finding European partners.²⁵

9 ANTIC (2007) op. cit.

10 Institut Panos Paris (1999) op. cit.

11 Tchinda Josué, T. (2007) *Survey of ICT and Education in Africa: Cameroon Country Report*, p. 4. www.infodev.org/en/Document.390.pdf

12 www.worldcomputerexchange.org

13 *Réseau de la société civile camerounaise pour la promotion des TIC* (Cameroonian Civil Society Network for the Promotion of ICTs)

14 *Collectif des Opérateurs Nationaux Exploitant dans le Secteur des Télécommunications du Cameroun* (Association of National Telecommunications Sector Operators of Cameroon)

15 Advisory Network for African Information Society, Central Africa

16 www.wagne.net/fia/dossiers/dossiers.php?id_dossier=20

17 Tchinda Josué, T. (2007) op. cit.

18 Willinsky, J. et al. (2005) Access to Research in Cameroonian Universities, *The Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries*, 21, p. 8. www.ejisdc.org/ojs2/index.php/ejisdc/article/view/

19 Ibid.

20 ANTIC (2007) op. cit., p. 48.

21 World Bank Institute (2009) A New Approach to Aid Effectiveness: Delivering on the Agenda for Action, *Development Outreach Magazine*, February, p. 34.

22 ANTIC (2007) op. cit.

23 Institut Panos Paris (1999) op. cit.

24 IREX (2007) op. cit.

25 Wame, B. (2005) *Internet au Cameroun: Les usages et les usagers Essai sur l'adoption des technologies de l'information et de la communication dans un pays en voie de développement*. PhD thesis, Université de Paris II Panthéon-Assas, 12 December.

At the same time telecentres are being set up in rural areas by the government and other stakeholders. These were initially funded by the state of Cameroon with the dividends generated by the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative in April 2006. Today, a little more than 40 telecentres have been set up and at least 60 others are under construction. The telecentres are now funded by the Telecommunications Special Fund, which was put in place to provide rural access to ICTs. Promisingly, 2,000 telecentres are expected to be set up by 2015.²⁶

Action steps

The following points ought to be considered:

- The current legal and regulatory framework governing the ICT sector is inadequate. Therefore, the creation of an adequate and effective legal and regulatory framework is needed.
- In terms of capacity building, the sharing of professional expertise and training must be encouraged in order to upgrade Cameroon's skills level.
- Reliable infrastructure such as electric power should be seen as essential for the successful roll-out of telecom infrastructure and ICT services.
- Private-public partnerships should form the basis for infrastructure implementation, especially for projects of national importance.
- E-government is also a very important development pillar and should be improved so that there is more transparency and accountability in the state, and so that trust amongst citizens is built.
- Funding for infrastructure roll-out and for the development of media institutions needs to be secured.
- In terms of legislation, there are currently no laws that regulate access to the internet. Telecommunications Law No. 98/014 of 14 July 1998 needs to be updated to take into account new telecommunication trends such as the globalised use of the internet and the information revolution. ■

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²⁶ Bello Bouba, M. (2008) Toutes les zones rurales du territoire seront quadrillées par les télé centres, *Performances des P&T*, 4 (August-October), p. 20-23.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH (GISWatch) 2009 is the third in a series of yearly reports critically covering the state of the information society *from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.*

GISWatch has three interrelated goals:

- **Surveying** the state of the field of information and communications technology (ICT) policy at the local and global levels
- **Encouraging** critical debate
- **Strengthening** networking and advocacy for a just, inclusive information society.

Each year the report focuses on a particular theme. **GISWatch 2009** focuses on *access to online information and knowledge – advancing human rights and democracy.* It includes several thematic reports dealing with key issues in the field, as well as an institutional overview and a reflection on indicators that track access to information and knowledge. There is also an innovative section on visual mapping of global rights and political crises.

In addition, 48 country reports analyse the status of access to online information and knowledge in countries as diverse as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mexico, Switzerland and Kazakhstan, while six regional overviews offer a bird's eye perspective on regional trends.

GISWatch is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH

2009 Report

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